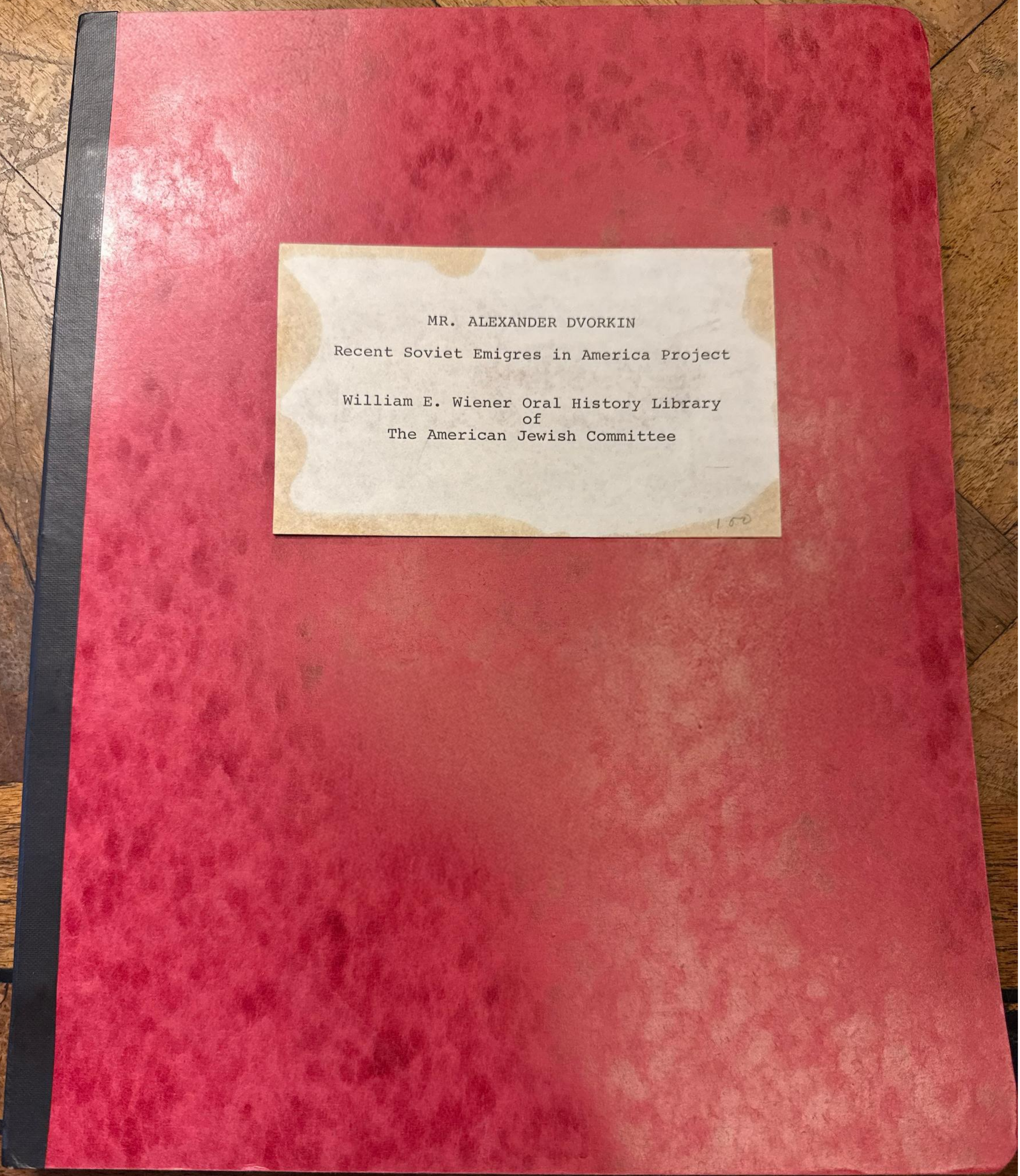

MR. ALEXANDER DVORKIN

Recent Soviet Emigres in America Project

William E. Wiener Oral History Library
of
The American Jewish Committee

100

Alexander Dvorkin
interviewed by Lynn Visson
June 19, 1979

Q. This is an interview with Alexander Dvorkin for the William E. Wiener Oral History Library's Soviet Emigre project by Lynn Visson at 315 East 68 Street, New York City, June 19, 1979. Tape One, Side One. Perhaps for a start, to continue where we left off and what we were just talking about, we could go back to some of the reasons that culminated in your decision to leave the Soviet Union and, with your interests in language and literature and in so many things connected with Russian culture, what is it that finally motivated you to decide to emigrate?

A. When I was in Italy there was a question on the application, why I did leave the Soviet Union, and people were telling...the workers of HIAS were telling everyone to not fill this question in the application.

Q. To not fill out the answer to that question in the application.

A. Yes, and wait till the meeting with their caseworker. So I waited and when I went to the meeting they told me to write that I left because of the anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union and want to be Jew in America. I refused to do it because in that time I really thought a lot about the fight with the Soviet Union in that time and was full of all these political projects, so I had my own answer which was probably EQUALLY the same stupid.

Q. Probably just as stupid?

A. Just as stupid as they offered me to fill in. It was that I hate the Soviet power and didn't have enough possibility to struggle against it in the Soviet Union, so I want to do it from outside. The secretary said that I would be better off just writing about the anti-Semitism, but I refused and she put it to the caseworker and she okayed it, so... I did answer it? ?

Q. Yes.

A. Well, you can ask me something more.

Q. But what were the real reasons that made you want to leave?

A. Well, in that time there ~~was the~~ WERE reasons. Now I'm just ~~in~~ OF a different opinion about it.

Q. About what?

A. About the way I want to live my life. I certainly don't want to live my life in struggle and I just don't feel anything anymore.

Q. All right. In... Go ahead.

A. No, what?

Q. In the Soviet Union you mentioned that you had had to work at quite a few different jobs. Why did you have to give up school and start working?

A. I was thrown out of school.

Q. For what reason?

A. Well, the official reason was that I didn't pass the tests and cut school a lot, but what they really did, they didn't give me permission to take any exams and that's why I couldn't go to the exams and I couldn't pass them. So... Yes?

Q. What kind of things did you do, I mean that made them not want to let you pass the exams?

A. I was the only hippie in my school.

Q. What did being a hippie in Moscow mean?

A. Well, certainly it doesn't mean what everybody thinks of hippie here and here some people would say I was a hippie when I was in high school. Well, in Russia actually we didn't call ourselves hippie because we felt that we are not real ones, the real ones are somewhere in the West, but now I know (?) When I came to America I had this idea of searching for the real hippies, but I couldn't find anyone and now I even have a doubt that there were ever any.

Q. Maybe there were in the past.

A. But everybody now is back at work and at the college and whatever and now they are writing books about their hippie past. There I just mean if you're on Soviet blacklist, that goes all through your life and you don't have a way back.

Q. In the Soviet Union?

A. In the Soviet Union.

Q. How do you think the Moscow hippies were different from

American hippies or what kinds of things did they do that were particularly offensive, upsetting (?), to the Soviet authorities?

A. I know what that means.

Q. Yes. Okay. [laugh]

A. Well, just reaction of the authorities. When actually the Moscow hippie movement started one of the reasons was the Western hippies and they were just trying to do something like that, but it was taken very seriously from the authorities and then, I don't know, it came out underground movement. It wasn't me, but at one time it was really popular among the students and at the time when I left it was down already, everybody had forgotten about them and the ones that WERE left were practically all heavy drug addicts and each of them had like SPENT years in mental hospitals.

Q. When you say "left," do you mean emigrated or left the hippie movement?

A. Hippies that are left.

Q. Are left.?

A. Are left.

Q. Yes. Did you yourself have any experiences with mental hospitals?

A. Yes.

Q. On what grounds were you put into one of these?

A. First I went there myself because I didn't want to go into the army and I knew that...I was still at the university then, but I knew that my university career soon will be over and I went there to save myself from the army. And after, twice I was taken there with the police.

Q. By the police?

A. With the police, with a police escort and then by the police. Well, actually they just called it an emergency, they even had an ambulance.

Q. What provoked them to do this or what was the reason for their doing that?

A. just a minute (?)

Q. Yes, that's okay. /recorder off/

A. First time I was just taken to the police because I didn't work and they wanted to know why. Then they started to beat me and I had a razorblade, so I cut my wrist and they took me to the emergency room inside the (?) mental hospital they got there as if I was committing suicide. So /laugh/ that was enough reason.

Q. Yes. Sounds like a pretty horrible situation. When you... Yes, go ahead.

A. And the second time I was just taken there. I had to visit my dispenser --

Q. Dispatchery.

A. Dispatcher --

Q. Dispensary.

A. -- a few times per year, and once I was taken there from there, they just didn't let me out.

Q. How did you finally get out?

A. As everyone else, for the Israeli reason.

Q. With what?

A. Israeli reason.

Q. When you weren't in school, when you were bumming around Russia -- [phone rings and recorder off] -- Russia, what kind of jobs did you work at to support yourself?

A. Practically none. Just once when I was in Kazakhstan I twice made money. They had like last balls when they graduate from high school in two small provincial towns and I just offered them my job as CONFERENCIER (?) What do you call it? Somebody who -- [recorder off]

Q. Like an emcee on the stage.

A. Yes.

Q. You mentioned you also worked as an orderly.

A. Yes, but it was when I was in Moscow. Usually I worked during the winter because in winter I had to live in Moscow because it was just hard to bum around (?) there. So

Then (?) I had to work, so I did in winter as an orderly, as X-ray technician. I did it twice.

Q. Did you like that kind of work?

A. Yes. I'm really fascinated with medicine, but I'm really bad at physics and chemistry. I even thought of some kind of medical studies, but I don't know chemistry or physics at all. But I studied a little medicine by myself.

Q. Where did you do poetry reading? You mentioned something about that.

A. In Kazakhstan.

Q. What kind of poets?

A. [laugh] (?)

Q. Who is not legally published in the Soviet Union.

A. Well, some of his stuff was --

Q. Yes.

A. -- but very few, few poems. Pushkin and who else? Pasternak, some Mandelstam. They didn't know anything in this province.

Q. Were they interested in it?

A. [laugh] Not at first, but I just was a strange person in Kazakhstan, so everybody just looked at me.

Q. Were they friendly or hostile or how did they treat you?

A. Yes. Well, I looked like really alien to them. Probably in that time I had the longest hair in all Kazakhstan. When I first got into this town and showed my student I.D. to the director of the school she asked me about my hair and I just answered that everybody wears hair like this in Moscow.

Q. /laugh/

A. So there was a young teacher who was from another small town but was very proud of it because the town was bigger than this one that she worked in and she said, "Yes, I was in Moscow and I know it."

Q. /laugh/ She was showing off.

A. So I got it.

Q. Where did you live in Kazakhstan?

A. I was once there. I was just walking across the steppe alone.

Q. Could you just sleep anywhere you wanted?

A. In the steppe?

Q. Yes.

A. Yes. But I usually slept in little villages. I bummed (?) my way, so I was around some village like every other night.

Q. Did the people there ever ask you for money to stay in the villages?

A. I had some money then with me, but just for eating, for the food, and in villages they had all this stuff over there. There were some Arapo (?)

Q. The construction brigades.

A. Groups of students were making money there, so I slept at their places. I just asked people, "Can I sleep there?" They go, "Sure." They would feed me.

Q. It's not quite like that in America, or at least in some parts of it.

A. People are very hospitable in the province.

Q. Did they ask you a lot of questions about Moscow or did they know what was going on in the rest of the Soviet Union?

A. No, but they weren't interested too much. They were asking me about us because we had really traveled and so on, about ourselves because they never saw such strange people. But it's very strange because the same person, like if you would see him in the middle of the day in the street he could scream at you and beat you up, but then at night if you would knock at his door, he would let you in and be really hospitable, a very hospitable person.

Q. That's interesting. A lot of Americans think, you know, that the farther you get from Moscow the more hospitable and the more open people are.

A. In Moscow they are too. It's just big cities, the cities are all different.

Q. Did you find more of a drug culture in Central Asia than in the larger cities?

A. I've never been in the real Central Asia. I was in Kazakhstan, northern Kazakhstan, but there weren't too many people around and there weren't any Kazakhs there, only Russians and Germans.

Q. No Kazakhs?

A. No.

Q. Hmm!

A. A lot of Germans.

Q. Germans?

A. Germans.

Q. How did they get there?

A. they came (?) after the war from all over.

Q. Did any of them want to go back to Germany or did they talk about it?

A. I am not familiar with it, but as far as I know, all the Germans in the Soviet Union now are applying to Western Germany and there's like second wave (?) of emigration now out of Russia because they are letting them out too. (?) I have heard about that since I came here, since I started reading newspapers.

Q. Did you read newspapers in the Soviet Union?

A. No. /both laugh/ First time here in my first months read Russian papers (?) and everybody reads this new literature first that they can get here. But it was true for me at least.

Q. Are you reading newspapers now?

A. No. Well, sometimes when my work /laugh/ gets slower. Well, actually every day I'm looking through New York Post. Because of my work the old lady gets it. /laugh/

Q. Well, given this hippie milieu in Russia, did you find that America was something like you expected or corresponded to the kind of picture you had or did it turn out to be very different from what you thought?

A. It turned out to be very different from what I thought.

Q. How? In what way was it different?

A. Well, it's just that there is no freedom in America. I thought of being totally free, which I didn't find here at all. I think that this country is better than the Soviet Union in the political sense, but in the different point of view, I mean in the meaning of not being free.

Q. What did you expect in terms of freedom that you didn't find here?

A. Well, I just didn't think that it would be this way. Well, first American freedom is freedom to buy, freedom of business, and all the other freedoms in America are just from the point of view of freedom of business because they are necessary for it, but not in any other sense. Actually most people here understand freedom as freedom to buy whatever you want. Like on my short hitchhiking experience in America of drivers from Colorado or [both laugh] somewhere else, they said, "Welcome to America, we are very free here. You see this car, I bought it for you know how much? Five thousand. Now I can buy another car. You can't get the cars there, huh?" and all this stuff. But actually nobody is free here because from the material sense, I mean everybody has to work and really work off his skin to feed his apartment and --

Q. Feed.

A. To feed.

Q. -- his apartment or people living in it.

A. And to save more and more for the doctors and to work for the establishment, to be like everybody else and not worse than the neighborhood, neighbors, and actually [laugh] I thought of continuing being hippie in America, but from the first day in America I gave up all my hippiness and now I work as everybody does.

Q. Well, when your dictionary comes out it should be a very valuable scholarly contribution to American knowledge of the Russian hippie movement. How long did you work on compiling that dictionary?

A. In the Soviet Union about a couple of years and then here it took me about a half a year to organize it, to put the stuff together.

Q. And what particular group does this slang reflect? Which groups used these kinds of words that are in your dictionary?

A. Hippie first. Well, that's the slang of hippies, but since that time it became very very popular among students. A lot of the words were used by the students because they were like hippie, people like, you know, that were playing hippie during the evening and then changed their clothes and they go during the day, was pretty big. It was just in fashion sometimes, so everybody wanted to look like hippie, so the slang spread and now it's used. Besides the drug terms, it's used by most of the students.

Q. When you say hippie culture for the Soviet Union, are you using that to mean drug culture or are you making a difference between the two?

A. Yes, I'm making a difference for it because hippie culture weren't born on drugs, so... The drug culture appeared just much later and it was very tightly tied together. But there was drug culture by prisoners and the Katorzhnye (word in (?) Russian)

Q. Convicts.

A. And the convicts, so it was different. Besides the Moslem culture, which is old hashish culture.

Q. And has been for a very long time. Did you find any link between either of these, either the hippie or the drug culture and any religious underground groups or mystical groups?

A. Well, a lot of hippies were interested in mystics and all kinds of religions and a lot of them went with the different religious sects and groups afterwards or at the time of their being hippies.

Q. What kinds of religious groups?

A. All kinds of, Christianity, zen (?) and Buddhism and all kind of wierd combinations --

Q. /laugh/

A. -- between Christianity and Buddhism, without really knowing Christianity and Buddhism both. And what else? (?)

Q. It sounds a bit like America in the end of the fifties in the beginning of the hippies. Did you yourself ever run into any anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union?

A. Yes.

Q. In what kinds of situations?

A. The official anti-Semitism.

Q. Expressed how or how did that go?

A. Well, as everybody told it, I shouldn't go to the university because they wouldn't take me, so I went to my school because they were taking Jews there. I don't know, everybody just told that there were a lot of official anti-Semitisms.

Q. But did you ever feel it in school, simply from other children when you were in school?

A. In grammar school or high school. Yes, I did, but not that much. Well, some others did.

Q. And in the Pedagogical Institute?

A. I don't remember any. Maybe some, but not a lot. We had quite a lot of Jews there and we decided who the anti-Semites are and we wouldn't talk with them.

Q. [laugh] So it didn't matter if they didn't talk to you.

A. All my hippie friends were very international and a lot of them up to now, all of my Russian friends, say, "You're a hippie, you're Jewish." [both laugh] "You can leave." A lot really want to be Jewish to leave.

Q. Would you like to go back to Russia if you could?

A. Yes.

Q. Could you imagine living there again at this point?

A. Well, the only possibility when I can go to Russia is when the government system changes there, so I think it won't happen.
(?) I thought so

Q. When you emigrated did you find the Jewish organizations helpful at all?

A. Well, they're helpful actually, but NYANA (?) is just too bad, so it created a lot of problems which shouldn't happen since this way I know the emigrants thought this organization takes them as their enemies.

Q. As their enemies.

A. As their enemies, and the organizations take the clients as their enemies too.

Q. Probably because they're overcrowded.

A. Not only. It's just very different people with different ideas and the organizations treat them quite bad. With the same money it could be organized much better. Don't ask me the rest of it, I don't know how to change it (?)

Q. I don't think anybody knows the recipe for that. Did you yourself have problems with the organizations?

A. Yes. Yes, but not that much. They cut me off without having job and apartment, but I managed.

Q. Had you learned English before you came here?

A. A little bit.

Q. Where did you study it?

A. In high school and when I was working in (?) my university. I was studying there too, but it was just too bad.

Q. That they taught?

A. Uh-huh. And before I left Russia a few months I took lessons with a private tutor. I could speak, but not that much. Actually I could express myself more or less.

Q. How did your friends, particularly those in the hippie movement, feel about your leaving?

A. They were very happy for me and jealous of me too.

Q. Was there anybody at all whom you knew who stopped talking to you when you decided to leave?

A. Of course not.

Q. Okay. How long did it take you to get your visa to leave?

A. Six months.

Q. Did you have any trouble in applying for the visa?

A. Well, my father wouldn't give me permission, so I had troubles with getting that from him. He was divorced with my mother since I was twelve, but still... But finally I got it from him.

Q. But once you had that you got the visa?

A. No, then I had to apply. It took me about six months to collect all the papers to apply, so altogether it took me about a year.

Q. Before you actually left.

A. Yes.

Q. And how much time did you spend in Rome?

A. Four months. I was all around Italy all this time, so I didn't mind (?)

Q. In Rome. What kind of things were you doing while you were traveling in Italy?

A. Just looking around at places and meeting people and relaxing.

Q. A lot of Americans have been interested in the phenomenon of Jews in Russia converting to Christianity recently. Did you find that this was any mass movement or did you know a lot of people who were interested in that?

A. Yes.

Q. Were these people of similar backgrounds or different or what was it that was getting them interested?

A. Well, practically all of them were with intellectual...some kind of intellectual background. I don't know, a lot of Jews were getting into Judaism too. I met a lot of those too who had the same intellectual background. Actually a little bit less intellectual. [both laugh]

Q. You mean the ones who were more getting into Judaism had a less --

A. Yes.

Q. -- intellectual background. [laugh] Did the ones who were converting to Christianity have any Jewish religious education?

A. Well, usually they had studied Judaism themselves. I mean not Judaism, but some Jewish studies like Jewish history and such (?), but not any really Jewish education. Well, none of my generation [OF] Jews in Moscow are circumcized, besides the ones who convert.

Q. To Judaism.

A. To Judaism. Like my friend Sasha Serkin, whom you know, but [laugh] now he forgot all his Judaism in America. You remember my friend Sasha.

Q. Yes, the one who came to the class.

A. No, not the last time.

Q. Oh yes. Yes.

A. With the short beard. You know (?)

Q. Yes. But I'm still interested in this, you know, the reasons why or what is it that makes these younger Jews become interested in Christianity.

A. Because Jews are very assimilated there and think there wouldn't be any anti-Semitism. Most of the Jews, let's say in Moscow and Leningrad and in intellectual centers, wouldn't feel themselves Jewish at all.

Q. And did you have any Jewish upbringing?

A. Jewish --

Q. Upbringing. (?)

A. No. No, then I started to go to the synagogue, I mean from about fifteen, sixteen. Actually I was raised in it all the time when I was in Russia, but more because of the political reasons and pressure (?) Well, and I felt myself Jewish there. Here I realized that I was wrong.

Q. In feeling Jewish.

A. In feeling Jewish because actually I'm Russian by culture and by language.

Q. And you're making a distinction between those two cultures.

A. Yes, of course.

Q. Do you feel anything in common, say, with American Jews?

A. All. All in common.

Q. Anything.

A. All the things.

Q. Because you're saying that you feel more Russian than Jewish.

A. Yes.

Q. Okay. And are most of the Jews who were converting to Christianity converting to Russian Orthodoxy?

A. Some of them converted to Catholicism, but most to Russian Orthodoxy. Plus I knew some Baptist Soviet Jews, but most were Russian Orthodox.

Q. Do you think they were also more identifying with Russian culture or were they looking for some spiritual dimension which they weren't finding in Judaism?

A. Both.

Q. What is it that isn't there in Russian Judaism really?

A. Well, do you want me to tell my particular opinion about Judaism?

Q. Yes.

A. It's a dead religion. I mean there is no spiritual life there anymore. There was in the Middle Ages and later, but then it just died. I thought that I will find some in Hasidic people, but they're just empty. They all live by the rules and all these little and big rules. The only religion now is the books of rules and not spirit... Maybe somewhere there is different...I mean Judaism in a different way, but here it is dead and in Russia it is dead. Maybe in Israel is something different, but I doubt it.

Q. Did you ever consider going to Israel instead of going to America?

A. When I was very young. Well, first of all, I can't go there because I'm a pacifist and I certainly wouldn't want to go into any army, not Soviet, not Israeli, not American or whatever.

Q. Do you think that among younger Russians there is a religious revival going on now, which is something some Americans would like to think.

A. Yes.

Q. In what kinds of groups?

A. Intellectuals. Intellectuals there.

Q. In what kinds of religion?

A. Mostly Russian Orthodoxy.

Q. Among both the Jews and the non-Jews?

A. Yes.

Q. Did you know any students who still believed in the Soviet ideology or who were really convinced Marxists?

A. No. None.

Q. None at all.

A. None at all.

Q. If you know now what you did about America, having lived here, would you still have decided to come here?

A. Well, that's not a correct question. I don't SECOND-guess (?) what happens. If a thing happened, it happened. I had to leave Russia because once you get stuck (?) there you have it all your life, it's like a disease.

Q. Like a disease.

A. Yes. I managed (?) and if I wouldn't leave I would think...all my life bother myself with why I wouldn't do anything, I would be unhappy all my life. So it was good for me.

Q. Okay. /recorder off/ Getting back to the hippies you were talking about in Moscow, how did the whole movement get started?

A. About the late sixties quite a few people and it was the first generation of hippies and practically all of them became alcoholics now.

Q. Like many other Russians.

A. Most of them. But then the second generation came and like the very beginning of the second generation hippies, the demonstration in 1971, the first of June, which is the International Day in Defense of Children. They had a lot of international days in the Soviet Union, and more than two thousand hippies were there. About half of them were arrested, about three hundred sent to mental hospitals and about eighty got fifteen days in prison for hooliganism. So that was like the biggest thing which hippies have ever done. I belong to the second generation and in my personal opinion second generation is the best one because it was much more sophisticated than the first one since most of the people there had some kind of...well, came from intelligentsia and most of them had a few years of college at least, and all of them or ninety percent of them are heavy drug addicts now. And then there is a third generation which are very young and by now they are, say, about twenty now or even less and they're more like drug addicts without any hope (?) because when they came it was the sunrise of the hippies anyway.

Q. Sunrise or sunset?

A. Sunset.

Q. Sunset. But what kinds of things did the people, say, your generation of the hippie movement do or want or what made up their life-style? What made them different from anybody else around them in Moscow?

A. Well, we called ourselves "Volosatye" (Russian word) (?), the hairy ones, and our EMBLEM (?) was long hair which we never would cut and we had like just Judaistic discussions about is it possible to talk to a person who was cut...his hair was cut by police or not until his hair grows. Most of us were poets or artists or musicians or with some kind of artistic talent. And what else? We' all were social dangerous.

Q. Socially dangerous.

A. Socially dangerous, mentally ill persons and all of us from time to time would get sent to the hospital, but what I think of all other (?) people in Russia, was we had nothing to lose anymore and being mentally sick persons gave us the right to do a lot of things which other people would never do and so mental hospitals were just the price which we paid for that freedom. Everybody should pay for everything, so we paid for it, this was our way. We just were very nonconformist and we didn't conform at all and it was good.

Q. You say gave you the right to do other kinds of things other people couldn't do. Like what?

A. Like to not live a double life and to not be members of the Komsomol and whatever and to not participate in any activities and to not vote and a lot of things. Our protest was passive.

Q. Was passive protest.

A. Passive. Yes, this was our way. We didn't communicate with dissidents too much and that's why we are totally unknown in the West, besides a few articles.

Q. By dissidents you mean political dissidents.

A. Yes, political dissidents.

Q. Do you think the hippie movement had any program for political reform or political change?

A. No.

Q. So it's more somehow individually oriented?

A. Yes.

Q. Well, what did people do when they got together?

A. Get stoned.

Q. But where could you get drugs from?

A. Got the hash from Asia and Caucasus, the Crimea and all that southern part. Got all the heavy drugs from the hospitals because they have a special savings ~~(?)~~ in the --

[End of Side One of tape -- beginning of Side Two]

Q. Interview with Alexander Dvorkin by Lynn Visson at 315 East 68 Street, June 20, 1979. Tape One, Side Two. I think when we stopped yesterday, when you got tired, you were talking about the hippie movement and about drugs and where they came from, and one also wonders as to the risk involved in the Soviet Union because in America you always read about very heavy penalties for drugs and so on, how this was all managed.

A. So they had special savings in the Soviet Union in case of addicts (?), medical savings of drugs.

Q. You mean supplies or reserves?

A. Reserves.

Q. Reserves.

A. And they had to change it every five years, to destroy it, to get new ones. But drugs, all drugs are very good after five years, nothing happens to them --

Q. [laugh]

A. -- so people would just sell a lot of them, the people who were in charge of these reserves, and that's how most ~~part of~~ drugs are gotten in the Soviet Union. But a lot of people just work in the hospitals --

Q. [laugh]

A. -- and do whatever they can do there. And about the penalties.

Well, all of us, again, were mental patients, so instead of a penalty we would get CONFINED TO ~~(?)~~ a year in mental hospital, year or more, but actually a year is about the deadline. After a year you can get a lot of the stuff back, and a lot of the things that you got there, it's neobratimye (Russian word) (?)

Q. Irreversible.

A. Irreversible. So that's enough, and most of my friends went through that by now.

Q. What kind of treatments do people get in these mental hospitals?

A. All kind of naroleptics, very heavy doses, and --

Q. Narcoleptics?

A. No, neuroleptics.

Q. Oh, drugs that affect the nervous system.

A. Yes, and psycholeptics and shock treatments, (?) and electrical shock, and those drugs (?), whatever.

Q. And what?

A. those drugs — (?) Those are special drugs which you have to take in addition to the other drugs always to take the "problem effects" (?)

Q. Side effects.

A. Side effects, to take off that. They're very bad too,

(?)

Q. Were there any conversations with psychiatrists or psychologists?

A. Yes, once in a while.

Q. What kinds of things were they interested in?

A. Well, asking all the questions. Well, everything sounds suspicious in a mental hospital. Whatever your answer is --

Q. [laugh]

A. -- your answer could be taken as a very sick one, so they would just write crazy (?)

Q. Well, one thing, you know, that people in the West always wonder is in the mental hospitals do you think there are people who are really mentally ill or is everybody...is it all a matter of dissidents or people who don't want to accept the Soviet lifestyle?

A. No, no, no. Most of the people are really ill in mental hospitals. By the way, when I was taken to the mental hospital once I had a chain on my neck with a coin or something, I don't remember, and I was taken there. So the next day the psychiatrist asked me about this coin and I told him that somebody gave it to me and that's for luck, and after a few days I managed to read what he wrote about it and he wrote, "He wears an old coin on his neck and he says that it's supposed to help him in bad situations." [both laugh]

Q. Did you feel there was ever anything positive in the mental hospitals, was there any effort to help at all?

A. For the mentally ill persons?

Q. Yes.

A. Well, they were just on a very heavy drug curement.

Q. Treatment.

A. Treatment, treatment. So they were quiet under all these drugs, with all these drugs. They were just put down for all this time and I don't think it's very helpful for them. It made them quiet down.

Q. Were there people you could talk to there in the mental hospital?

A. Yes. Yes, there were some very interesting patients. There were some...usually in each department there were some... I forgot the word again, Katorzhnye (word (?) in Russian)

Q. Convicts.

A. Convicts who were trying to get away with something and I would talk to them.

Q. You mean by pretending to be mentally ill?

A. Yes.

Q. /laugh/ Hiding out in a mental hospital.

A. Yes. Well, because after they arrest you, if you act somehow strange, they can put you into a mental hospital to prove if you are a mentally sick person, and if you were sick at the time of committing the crime you just get a year or more of cure in the mental hospital. So some people would prefer it. They didn't know what would be better (?) 3

Q. Prefer that to prison. I remember you talked also about run-ins with the militia. When and where did that happen to you that I think you said you had some trouble with the militia?

A. Every other day [both laugh] in every city and town. I just looked suspicious.

Q. [laugh] [recorder off]

A. Okay. Well, the most heavy, once we were in Crimea where I was shaved once, then in the City of Kherson I was taken to prison for two weeks. Well, besides the ones where I was beaten, but, okay, it happened too much, so I can't remember all the times.

Q. Why did they take you to prison in Kherson?

A. Because they said that my friend and me had false passports, and if a person can't prove his identification, they have a right to arrest him in his city for three days and in a strange city for two weeks. So there of course it took them two weeks to call to Moscow and prove --

Q. That you were you.

A. -- my passport. Yes.

Q. What was the prison like?

A. Actually it wasn't prison, it was prison for all the people with unproven I.D., like all the bums. That's some kind of prison (?) What do you call it? In Russian it's called (preventive detention in Russian) (?)

Q. We call it preliminary detention here.

A. Yes. But it was a room with all these people and they were really nice to us, and there a person didn't have to work, but if he wouldn't work they won't feed you, so all of us actually had to work, and there was no work on Sundays and no food on Sundays.

Q. No food?

A. No food.

Q. What kind of work?

A. Oh, we had to cut threads out of a (KOMOK - Russian for ball of wool) (?)

Q. A ball of wool.

A. Balls from the factory, whatever is left, you know, but we had to do a whole box of them for a whole day with this very sharp knife. /laugh/ After the first day all my fingers were cut all over. If you wouldn't do a whole box, they wouldn't feed you. Well, you do a part of it and they give you a hamburger, another part they would give you the bone (?), another was for the soup, /both laugh/ or whatever you got.

Q. Were you in Isolation (?), was everybody all together?

A. No, with everybody all together, thirty people all together.

Q. Men and women?

A. No men. Only women.

Q. Only men?

A. They had another room for women.

Q. And what happened when you finally got out of there?

A. I bought an ice cream. [both laugh] (?)

Q. And was Odessa any easier for hippies?

A. Yes, I wasn't arrested there. That was nice. For about ten days I wasn't asked for my I.D.'s, nothing. I managed.

Q. Okay. [recorder off]

A. I was shaved though.

Q. By the police again?

A. Yes, since the time in Crimea, so... My clothes was pretty different then too.

Q. Your clothes were different? You mean than other people?

A. Yes.

Q. How?

A. Oh, old, dirty and strange.

Q. [laugh] Yes, and Russians tend to comment on things like that in the street quite a lot. [laugh] [recorder off] Do you find that there is a difference in the way you spent spare time in the Soviet Union and the way you spend it here or in the kinds of things you do in spare time?

A. Well, I have just much less spare time here than I had there, there practically all the time was mine. But there I was getting stoned all the time, but here I don't. I read about the same. Well, there I read more because I had more spare time.

Often I (?) listened to the music

(?) Here I get more music because I own A (?) stereo.

Q. What takes up more of your time here, when you said you have less spare time here?

A. Work and school.

Q. What kind of work are you doing now?

A. I work as a general helper in collectors' club.

Q. How would you compare the level of education, say the kinds of courses you have here in school -- I believe you're at Hunter College -- and the kind of courses you had in the Soviet Union in the Pedagogical Institute in terms of the educational level?

A. There it was much more helpful.

Q. There in Moscow?

A. Yes, there. When I was there I hated that system of education and thought it was very bad because I had to study a lot of ideological stuff and I was dreaming about freedom of choice like in America, but first I saw that here a student practically doesn't have this freedom of choice because he has requirements which he has to fill and all these requirements just.. He doesn't get or she doesn't get enough professional training and then practically none of the students can build himself a good program for himself. So in Russia, besides ideological subjects, I got much better linguistic and philological education than I possible could get here in terms of the program and the ~~systematic~~ of education and whatever was covered.

Q. How would you compare the cultural level of the students?

A. In America and in Russia?

Q. Yes.

A. Well, there are like a few different ~~like~~ castes of students in the Soviet Union which are truly very different. Like the Special (?) caste, the biggest one, refers to the students which are called "technical students" (?)

Q. wrong (?)

A. Technical students.

Q. Yes, the technocrat students.

A. Technocrat students, the ones who will become engineers or something like that, and they are like the less intellectual. And then the humanitarian students.

Q. Humanities.

A. Humanities students, WHO which were much higher, first because to study humanities most of the times you had to be in university or at least in pedagogical institute, so there were just fewer of them. And then were the other (?) students of some prestigious colleges, like the party ones, like (see below) Torez (?) and (see below) Imamoshniki (?)

Q. Yes, the Institute of Foreign Languages and the Institute of International Relations.

A. Yes. And the artistic, the artistic colleges, bohemians.

Q. Bohemians.

A. Yes. So I don't know, I can't talk too much about American students because I haven't met a lot of them, but not very (?) much. In colleges they get whatever, you know, much less a purely professional training than in the Soviet Union and they read much less than Soviets. I can't say anything about the graduate school here, but the most improtant part is that most of the people are not educated systematically here. [recorder off]

Q. To get back to the older generation for a minute, did your parents have any experiences with anti-Semitism or problems during the war because of that?

A. Yes. My mother was born in Ukrainia and... Well, actually she was born in Byelorussia, but she liv~~b~~ed in Ukraini~~a~~E in a small town with her uncle, who was the one who circumcizes the children and kills the animals.

Q. Ritually to make them kosher.

A. Yes. So she was brought up in a religious family. She wasn't religious herself. But then when the war broke out she got into the ghetto and then (?) her uncle and aunt were shot. She was shot too, but she survived and she was taken by one Ukrainian family to their home and they hid her for three years until the Soviets got back. So that was her experience. 3

Q. What about your father, did he have any experiences with anti-Semitism?

A. I don't know my father too well, but, well, he was in the army. Well, probably he got some [Anti-semitism] from the soldiers, but I don't know my father too well. /recorder off/

Q. What are the kinds of things that you dislike most about life in America?

A. For myself?

Q. Um-hmm.

A. Just the, I would say, the (see Below) (?)

Q. Material dependence.

A. Yes, material dependence (?)

Q. And what kinds of features of American life do you like?

A. That you can get any literature that you want and you can read whatever you want, if you have time.

Q. Do you find that most of the people you associate with are

Americans or Russians?

A. Russians. Now.

Q. Do you think it's just because of language or because of something in common, your culture?

A. Well, because of very big cultural difference.

Q. What kinds of cultural differences do you see between Americans and Russians?

A. Just very big national culture differences which are almost nonconvertible without losing a lot of things. It's very difficult to participate in both, so you have to give up one and I don't want to give up my Russian culture.

Q. You want to hold onto that Russian culture.

A. Yes. I accept American culture and I get a lot from it, but I wouldn't want to be American and to live the American style of life.

I don't know # what will happen.

Q. Could you imagine living in another country, say Western Europe somewhere?

A. I don't know the other cultures. Probably not. Probably not. Everywhere it will be the same. You know, the grass is greener on the other side.

Q. As the Russian proverb goes.

A. Huh?

Q. As the proverb goes. /recorder off/ What were the major sources from which you learned about America while you were still in the Soviet Union?

A. The Voice of America, the people talking, the modern American literature and the old American literature. Actually there is no old, but whatever it is. These were my sources.

Q. And did you meet any Americans while you were there?

A. Yes. Yes, I met quite a lot. They seemed very ~~BRIGHT~~ Strange (?) to me in Russia because of the language difference.

Q. Oh. Yes.

A. Of course. You know, when you meet somebody who speaks your own language, if you don't know any foreign language. I don't know, that's my impression. I think that's true, you take a person for one who is much smarter than he is because whatever he says, whatever stupid he says, you take it for...it's because he doesn't know the language enough. (?)

Q. Okay. /recorder off/

A. -- some helpful information for some. Well, I don't know.

Q. I think you certainly did. I think you have a unique experience in the Soviet Union which should be very interesting for Americans. /recorder off/ Yes, and you wanted to add something about freedom here I think and other things that you liked.

A. Well, that all goes together with the books that you can get here and

afraid to read anything the fuck— (?) that you're not

(?)

But you have to work here

(?)

because just,you know, one works (?) [recorder off] As I said already, I was saying (?), that for whatever was in the Soviet Union was just our...I mean whatever we paid for the freedom. Here you pay different [PRICES] ones and you have less freedom.

Q. Yes, but,you know, Russia is a country where everybody talks about work and everybody says you ought to work.

A. Nobody works, or very few people.

Q. Yes, although the slogans and everything else are saying all the time you should be working, working.

A. (See below) (?)

Q. Glory to work.

A. Glory to labor.

Q. Yes. While here people don't talk about it, but from what you're saying, they work more.

A. (?) [recorder off]

Q. It's not true? Americans talk a lot about their work?

A. Yes.

Q. [laugh]

A. They do. /recorder off/

Q. Okay. Thank you very much and I guess we'll quit here.

/End of tape/